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# Evaluation of the criterion validity of the Antisocial Attitudes Assessment Scale in Romanian Adolescents

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## Abstract

Antisocial attitudes are one of the best predictors of delinquent behavior and thus a primary object of screening and intervention. In an effort to better evaluate those attitudes, the *Antisocial Attitudes Assessment Scale (ATSA)* was developed for the Romanian adolescents' population (Vasile, 2009). This paper discusses aspects related to ATSA validity. A sample of 135 high-school students was tested using ATSA and the Zuckerman-Kuhlman Personality Inventory. Significant correlations obtained between the strength of antisocial attitudes and the personality dimensions of impulsivity, aggression-hostility and sociability, as well as gender-related differences, support the construct validity of the scale.

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**Keywords:** antisocial attitudes, adolescent offenders, assessment scale, psychometric properties, criterion validity.

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## 1. Theoretical background of the study

Antisocial attitudes are of special relevance for judicial psychologists as they were shown in the literature to be related with the development and maintenance of deviant and delinquent behaviors – behaviors that display a peak in adolescence.

### 1.1. Studies and researches on antisocial attitudes

The term “antisocial attitudes” or “pro-criminal attitudes” refers to a group of attitudes that are favorable to the breaking of moral and legal norms – a situation which defines deviant and delinquent behavior respectively.

In this class of attitudes are usually included negative attitudes towards the judicial system (legal institutions and legal authorities), tolerance towards law breaking, tolerance towards criminal justifications and identification with delinquent peers (delinquent self-image) (Simourd & Olver, 2002). During early and middle adolescence, antisocial attitudes consist of: mistrust of authority figures (police etc.), contesting the validity of laws, tolerance towards law breaking and identification with a delinquent subculture (Andrews, Leschied, & Hoge, 1992).

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Studies have shown that violent and antisocial behavior is influenced significantly by pro-criminal sentiments, and not by the maturation level of socio-moral thinking; most of the criminals know what is „right”, but prefer to do „wrong”, their moral sentiments being underdeveloped (Stevenson, Hall, & Innes, 2004; Mira Y Lopez, 2007).

The direction of the association between antisocial attitudes and antisocial behavior is a major topic of research. Longitudinal studies have shown that, in youths that have not yet become delinquent, attitudes determine and predict future behavior. People having positive attitudes towards delinquency will tend more towards a delinquent behavior. Meta-analyses showed that antisocial attitudes are the best dynamic predictors of antisocial behavior, recidivism and the maintenance of an antisocial life style - explaining up to 40 % of recidivism variance (Gendreau, Goggin, Chanteloupe, & Andrews, 1992; Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996).

On the other hand, in youths beginning their criminal career in early adolescence, it is behavior that influences attitudes (and like in a circle, attitudes reinforce and sustain behavior). People behaving in a delinquent manner will justify or excuse their behavior by developing a positive attitude towards delinquency. A six-year longitudinal study conducted in Holand on a sample of 550 adolescents had shown that for the adolescents at the beginning of their criminal career, attitudes influence actual behavior; but for the ones experimenting with criminal behavior over a longer period of time, it is behavior that influences attitudes towards offending (Engels, Luijpers, Landsheer, & Meeus, 2004).

The complex relation between antisocial attitudes and antisocial behavior in adolescence is mediated by a series of individual and contextual characteristics.

According to the criminological theory of Hans Eysenck, delinquents are extraverts, emotionally unstable, aggressive and hostile (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978). Although empirical testing of this theory had found contradictory results (Rebollo, Herrero, & Colom, 2002), many authors agreed upon the high predictive value of primary personality traits such as impulsivity and sensation seeking (Carroll et al., 2006). Impulsivity refers to an inability to delay gratification, impatience, lack of reflection on the consequences of behavior. In teenagers, it is a central symptom in several psychopathological states – such as conduct disorders (rule breaking, vandalism, theft, aggression), pathological gambling, substance abuse, noninhibited sexual behavior (Robbins & Bryan, 2004). Impulsive adolescents lack cognitive control of their behavior and tend to adopt a risky life-style, ignoring norms and laws; this fact that can drive them towards delinquency.

As for the mediator social variables, various studies mention: the existence of delinquent friends; high rate of criminality and availability of drugs in the neighborhood; low family income etc. (Thornberry et al., 1994; Herrenkohl et al., 2001; Mulvey et al., 2004; Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2006; Butler, Fearon, Atkinson, & Parker, 2007).

Several instruments measuring antisocial attitudes are currently in use; among these we cite: *The Measures of Criminal Attitudes and Associates* (Mills, Kroner, & Hemmati, 2004); *The Criminal Sentiments Scale* (Andrews & Wormith, 1984) and *The Criminal Sentiments Scale - Modified* (Simourd, 1997); *The Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles* (Walters, 2002).

## 1.2. Development and preliminary validation of the Antisocial Attitudes Assessment Scale for Adolescents

The *Antisocial Attitudes Assessment Scale for Adolescents* (ATSA - Vasile, 2009) was the first scale developed in Romania for measuring the strength of antisocial attitudes in adolescents. It assesses the attitudes towards the laws, law breaking, criminal others and the work of the judicial agents (Vasile, 2009).

The scale includes 69 items, organized in two parts. *Part I* includes 39 items referring to several aspects of criminal justice: laws utility, the necessity to respect the laws, the motivation of criminal acts etc. (item examples: „You must know how to break the laws and get away with it”; „Some laws are not good”; „Many persons commit offences because they have no other choice”; „Laws are made to be broken”). *Part II* includes 30 items referring to the judicial agents (policemen, prosecutors, judges and lawyers), evaluated in terms of: honesty, responsibility, fulfillment of duties and competence (examples of items: „Do not help common people”; „Do their duty”; „Follow their own interest”; „Help only rich and powerful people”; „Provide security and trust”; „Punish innocent people”).

Items are rated on a five-point *Likert*-type scale (from „totally agree” to „totally disagree”). A score is computed for each part (for part II, separate assessments are done for each category of judicial agents, and a mean score is computed). Low scores indicate respect for the laws and the judicial agents. By contrast, high scores indicate identification with a delinquent model, adhesion to antisocial norms and attitudes and a tendency to perceive negatively the activity of the judicial agents.

The derivation sample consisted of 336 adolescents and youths from Pitesti city, Arges County. The research was conducted from December 2008 to February 2009. A first estimation of the psychometric properties of the scale gave satisfactory results. The *Alpha Cronbach* coefficients were .903 for part I and .969 for part II, indicating good reliability. Between the two parts of the scale were found direct, medium and statistically significant at a .01 level correlations, giving a first estimation of the convergent (concurrent) validity of the scale. There is also proof of the content validity of the scale, the scale being empirically derived by qualitative content-analysis of 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with high-school and university students.

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1. Purpose of the study

The objective of the present study was to further assess the validity of ATSA, clarifying aspects related to construct validity. In order to do this, the concept of antisocial attitudes was related to other fundamental psychological concepts. In accordance with data existing in the literature, it was postulated that ATSA scores would correlate with certain personality features (impulsivity, aggressiveness) and would differ depending on gender.

### 2.2. Participants

The study was conducted on a sample of 135 adolescent randomly selected from five high-schools from Pitesti city, Arges County. The initial sample included 158 subjects, but after the non-valid protocols (non-responses, high score on the validity scale of ZKPQ) were removed from the analysis, 135 valid cases remained. Among those 135, 29.6 % were men and 70.4% women. Their age varied between 14 and 19 years ( $M=16.51$ ,  $SD= 1.165$ ).

### 2.3. Measures

The research was carried out from September to December 2009. Each adolescent completed two tests: *The Antisocial Attitudes Assessment Scale for Adolescents* (ATSA, Vasile, 2009), described above, and the Romanian form of *The Zuckerman-Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire* (ZKPQ, Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta and Kraft, 1993). *The Zuckerman-Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire* includes 99 yes-no items, grouped into five personality scales (sociability, impulsive sensation seeking, activity, anxiety-neuroticism and aggressivity – hostility) and one validity scale. The scale was adapted for the Romanian population; the psychometric properties for the Romanian form were satisfactory and similar to the ones reported for the original form (Alpha coefficients for different subscales varied between .71 and .87) (Opre, 2004).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive results

The mean score obtained by the subjects on the *ATSA scale*, compared to norms, indicates a medium intensity of the strength of antisocial attitudes. This holds for both ATSA parts ( $M=2.69$  for part I, and  $M=3.33$  for part II).

As for the scores on the personality test, obtained data draw the following portrait: a medium to high level of *impulsivity and sensation seeking* ( $M=12.21$ ); a medium to high level of *aggressivity -hostility* ( $M=9.26$ ); a medium level of need for *activity* ( $M=8.93$ ); a medium level of *sociability* ( $M=8.26$ ); a high level of anxiety and emotional instability ( $M=9.99$ ). The table below summarizes these results.

Table 1. Scales' descriptive statistics

	ATSA		ZKPQ				
	Part I: laws	Part II: judicial agents	Impulsivity	Aggressivity	Activity	Sociability	Nevrotism
M	2.69	3.33	12.21	9.26	8.93	8.26	9.99
SD	.477	.616	3.454	3.172	2.723	2.676	3.917

### 3.2. Bivariate results

To test the association between the strength of antisocial attitudes and a series of personality features, the Pearson parametric correlation test was used (scores were approximately normally distributed).

Results indicate positive, medium and statistically significant correlations ( $p < .01$ ) between the strength of antisocial attitudes and the impulsive sensation seeking dimension. The higher the tendency to act impulsively and the general need for sensations, the higher the strength to adopt antisocial attitudes. In addition, positive, statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) and medium to strong correlations were found between the strength of antisocial attitudes and the aggressiveness-hostility dimension. Subjects that show a predisposition for verbal expression of aggression and a pattern of antisocial behaviors also display antisocial attitudes. This results hold for both parts of ATSA.

The general need for activity (activity dimension) was found to be unrelated to antisocial attitudes ( $p > .05$ ). This happened also for the anxiety - neuroticism dimension ( $p > .05$ ). The results are explained by the fact that the research sample is a non-delinquent one.

A positive, very weak but statistically significant correlation was found between the scores on part I of ATSA and the sociability dimension. The existence of a direct correlation is explained by youth's tendency towards involvement in group activities – and youth delinquency is especially group delinquency. The correlation is weak, because of sample characteristics – non-delinquent adolescents prefer to be involved in socially desirable activities.

Table 2. Correlations between ATSA and ZKPQ scores (n=135)

			ATSA I_ laws	ATSA II_ judicial agents
ZKPQ	Impulsivity	r	.374** (R= .140)	.407** (R= .165)
		p	.000	.000
	Aggressivity	r	.522** (R= .272)	.618** (R= .381)
		p	.000	.000
	Activity	r	.092	-.025
		p	.287	.772
	Sociability	r	.176* (R= .030)	-.103
		p	.042	.234
	Neuroticism	r	.011	.002
		p	.902	.984

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As for the relation between gender and the strength of antisocial attitudes, girls have been found to score lower on ATSA scales; the differences between boys and girls are statistically significant (for part I:  $t = 3.537$ ,  $p = .001$ ; for part II:  $t = 2.340$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Presented below is a table with the results of the t-test for independent samples.

Table 3. Differences between boys (n=40) and girls (n=95)

	M, SD (girls)	M, SD (boys)	t	p (t-test)	Omega-squared
ATSA I_ laws	2.60 .461	2.91 .451	3.537	.001	.078
ATSA II_ judicial agents	3.25 .612	3.52 .590	2.340	.001	.032

## 4. Conclusions

Consistent with existing data in the literature, we have found that the strength of antisocial attitudes is directly associated with the level of impulsivity, sensation-seeking, aggressiveness and sociability. These results can be linked to the developmental characteristics of the target group, as impulsivity and sensation-seeking reach a peak in late adolescence (16-19 years) and group membership and group delinquency are characteristic of this age (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1977; Luengo, Carrillo-de-la-Peña, Otero, & Romero, 1994).

The weak correlation of antisocial attitudes with sociability and the no significant relations with the need for activity and anxiety dimensions can be explained by the fact that the sample was a community (non-delinquent) one. Also, a relation has been found between gender and antisocial attitudes; as expected, the level of antisocial attitudes

was higher in boys. The obtained size effect coefficients were small or medium, but this also can be accounted by the fact that subjects were non-delinquents.

Overall, results support the construct validity of the ATSA scale.

Having a reliable and valid assessment tool for antisocial attitudes in adolescences allows the prediction of future behavior and is one of the premises of an efficient intervention for delinquent and at-risk adolescents. Delinquency prevention or psychological counseling programs targeting antisocial attitudes (programs carried on in schools and similar institutions) may lead to a decrease in the frequency and severity of antisocial behaviors.

Further validation studies are necessary to clarify aspects related to the criterion validity and the discriminative validity of the scale (the relationship of scale scores with criminal history variables and the ability of the scale to distinguish between delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents respectively).

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